



To Counter Beijing, Send In the Coast Guard

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As Washington looks to counter Beijing's ambitions, one good idea is to unleash the U.S. Coast Guard, which could and should play a larger role in preserving order in the Pacific. The recent appearance of a 200-ship Chinese "fishing" flotilla in the South China Sea, loitering in Beijing-claimed waters and intimidating regional states, shows the urgency of addressing China's maritime predations.

The U.S. and Taiwan took a good first step last month by signing an agreement that will allow the two countries' coast guards to work together more closely. Beijing immediately denounced the U.S.-Taiwan memorandum of understanding. Earlier this year China enacted a law authorizing its own coast guard to fire on foreign vessels entering its "territorial waters," which it defines far more extensively than those recognized by international law.

This is Beijing's latest foray into the "gray zone," the space between peace and war that has become the preferred operating environment for the world's tyrannies. From Russia's use of "little green men" (mercenaries and partisans) to infiltrate Crimea and eastern Ukraine and Iran's reliance on proxy militias across the Middle East to China's longstanding use of its fishing fleet, revisionist powers seize ambiguity to test Western resolve and rewrite the global order in their favor.

China has long viewed its coast guard, now the world's largest, as a tool for injecting uncertainty into encounters at sea. Beijing exploits the ostensibly civilian status of such vessels to press its territorial claims while pretending not to be escalating conflicts. Many observers have noted the similarity between Chinese coast guard and naval vessels; the only difference is the color scheme. The Chinese coast guard operates throughout the South China and East China Seas and has recently been expanding its presence in the Pacific islands.

Thus the case for expanding the role of the U.S. Coast Guard. The smallest of the U.S. military services by budget, the Coast Guard is best known for missions of mercy, saving stranded mariners or rescuing natural-disaster victims. Its work also includes guarding oil platforms in the Persian Gulf, conducting drug interdiction in the Caribbean, and operating in the Arctic.

Commanded by the Department of Homeland Security rather than the Pentagon, except in wartime, and imbued with law-enforcement powers, a Coast Guard vessel and its crew are well-suited to counter malign activity from their Chinese counterparts. As China's coast guard attempts to enforce territorial claims against American allies such as Japan and the Philippines and partners such as Taiwan and Vietnam, the U.S. Coast Guard can offer invaluable support.

As a quasimilitary service, its presence can help ease confrontations at sea while deterring Chinese aggression. The Coast Guard's new Legend-class National Security Cutter is powerful enough to be the premier warship in most navies.

Yet the Coast Guard doesn't get the resources it deserves. The service conducts a range of missions; demands are increasing on its ships, aircraft and personnel. But the budget is a paltry \$12 billion, compared with \$160 billion for the Navy. The Biden administration should ask Congress for additional money to cover current missions but also to add missions in the Indo-Pacific. The Coast Guard should expand its forward-deployed presence in the region, operating from bases in Japan and Guam, or from a new facility proposed for American Samoa.

China's "gray zone" operations pose a serious threat to the free and open Indo-Pacific that the U.S. has pledged to safeguard. A well-prepared U.S. Coast Guard, operating with allies and partners in the contested waters of East Asia and the Western Pacific, would be a powerful counterweight to Beijing's territorial ambitions.

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